

# **How Toys Teach Children Stereotypical Gender Roles: A Look Inside a Local Toy Store**

By Denise Starr

"Spiderman" action figures, "The Care Bears," "Legos," and the famous "Viewmaster," all represent popular toys from the past. Today, toy stores divide the many toys, games and movies into two primary categories: boy and girl. After going into "Toys R Us," many can conclude that the toys which children play with, pass down stereotypes of gender roles. Through their gender-biased toys, typically, boys learn "warrior-like" roles and girls learn to nurture. Girls' toys stress physical beauty and appearance while boys' toys focus on respect for their physical abilities (Campenni 122). Gender socialization, through toys, teaches and reinforces stereotypical gender roles.

In order to understand the influences today's popular toys have on youngsters, it becomes vital to first understand gender socialization. "Gender" refers to the socio-cultural dimension of being female or male (Maccoby 6). Authors Bryjak and Soroka say, "Human beings are not born with any pre-existing knowledge of, or orientation to, their world. What we come to feel about life and about ourselves, we learn through socialization, the social mechanisms through which gender developments occur" (214). In hospital rooms, babies encounter gender socialization occurs for the first time when nurses place traditional "blue" or "pink" caps on their heads. Sociologist, LaFreniere states, "By the time children are 3 to 4 years old, they have already formed an image of themselves as boy or girl" (Bryjak 214). Children form these images from parents, teachers, societal members, and the toys and games with which they play. O'Brien considers that, "Preference for play with same sex stereotyped toys is considered to be the beginning of sex role development in young children" (1). Bryjak and Soroka also claim, "Preparation for a future adult role often entails learning about activities deemed appropriate for members of ones sex. Learning to be an adult, thus, translates into learning to be a proper adult women or adult man" (214-215). With gender biased and stereotypical views, society sets forth the mold of a "proper" adult.

An overview of findings at "Toys R Us" helps to expose the hidden sexism that occurs through children's toys. Except for "Sesame Street," and "Fisher Price," who manufacture successful gender-neutral toys to children younger than four years of age, "Toys R Us" actually divides toys into a blue and navy "boys" section, and a pink and white "girls" section. Furthermore, toy packaging exhibited significant color differences. The store aisles contained plenty of pinks, the most popular "girl" color by 95%, yellows, whites, lavenders, reds and pastels. Conversely, the boys' aisles had an array of blue the most popular "boys" color by 95% as well, green, red, black, gray, and brown ("Our Survey" 1). In addition to color,

inventory also reveals sexism. The female section of the toy store was much bigger than the male side possibly feeding into the stereotype that women have more material objects than men. Little girls could buy dolls and kitchen sets, and boys had access to action figures and weapons. Estelle Campenni justifies this stock in toy stores by saying, "Boys have shown to prefer more vehicles, weapons, and spatial-temporal items while girls request more dolls, domestic items, and musical instrument in the Christmas request" (122). These items, chosen by young children can lead them to improper gender role socialization and gender stereotypes.

Through popular toys such as "My Sweet Home" doll set, "Baby Born" doll, "My Little Helper Stove," "2-in-1 Vacuum Set," and the popular "Elegant Tea Set," young girls learn that their roles take place in the home. They learn that their duties require completion of household chores and nurturing the children. The descriptions on many of the packages tell the child the importance of their "roles." For example, the script on the box of "Baby Newborn," doll set says, "Without you, Baby Newborn could not survive. Through your love and support Baby Newborn can grow to be just like you." Messages like these tell girls that only they can provide a child with the love and care they need to survive, reinforcing the stereotype that women stay home and take care of the children.

Many girls' toys also teach the obsessive value of appearance for societal acceptance. Girls learn how to be beautiful, making themselves acceptable in society. Rhonda Lieberman says, "Societies have produced idealized images of beauty as a means of identifying what they are not" (1). Mattel's internationally famous "Barbie" should partly take responsibility for the picture-perfect "standard of beauty" girls learn to value. With her leggy, busty figure and body measurements that would make it impossible for her to stand up in real life, "Barbie" is available in an assortment of races, colors, and professions, to appeal to any background" (Borger 1). Through "Barbie's" image, girls think the perfect, attractive, and socially accepted woman, is thin, but well endowed, glamorous, happy, and silent. "Barbie" also offers a young girl a "workout" tape to stay in shape, again reinforcing the message that thin and only thin is acceptable. Besides "Barbie's," toy stores offer young girls beauty products such as, "Glamour Girl Set," "Barbie Dress Up Set," "Manicure Mania," "Super Hair Creations," and "Scent Salon Boutique," to re-enforce the importance of personal appearance.

The last observances of the "girls" section of "Toys R Us," were the difference in girls' games. Popular girls games include, "Girl Talk," "Telephone Tag," "Electronic Dream Phone," "Dream Date Match Maker Service," and "Barbie's Virtual Make Over CD ROM." The main difference between boys' and girls' games is that girls' games do not challenge the mind; rather, they only expand on gender stereotypes. Games made

for girls teach them to sit and play quietly, under the stereotype that girls are better at simple repetitive task (Maccoby 6). These products are manufactured under the stereotype that girls socialize more than boys, teach girls to value socializing with friends rather than education (Maccoby 6). Educator and researcher, Janese Swanson, said this about girls games, "Young girls are not specifically encouraged to participate in 'active' activities, and are encouraged to 'be careful' (3). The toys teach young girls their "roles" inside the home cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the young, all the while looking eloquently beautiful for those on the outside world. Overall, girls' toys teach them that their gender role is and cannot be superior to that of their male counterpart.

In general, toys even suggest that our society values young boys more highly than girls. Campenni says, "Interestingly it appears that there may be more stereotyping regarding toys offered to boys. For their sons, parents tend to choose more masculine and gender-neutral toys, than female toys (122). Like "Small Soldiers Action Figures," "Small Soldiers Karate Fighters," "Starwars Double Take Death Kit," and "WWF Ring Warriors Wrestling Kit," most masculine toys encourage competitive and aggressive behavior, but are also more constructive, conducive to handling, and much more reality based. Masculine traits associated with these toys are aggressive, active, dominant, and competitive (Campenni 123). These toys reflect negativity because they send a message that violence can solve problems. Through their toys, boys receive a message of being active, assertive, often associating in violent activities, and war games. They learn that they must be strong and "Warrior-Like" in order to be accepted as a real man. These particular toys have become so popular due to the stereotype that all boys show more aggressive behavior than girls (Swanson 2). Psychologist O'Brien and Huston found that on average boys will choose these masculine toys frequently because they will get approval from their peers for playing with toys said to "appropriate to their sex" (1).

Through their toys, boys also learn about adventure and physical activity outside of the home, and also about high paying white-collar occupations, unlike girls' toys. Generally boys toys prepare the for the "real world." For example, the "Electronic Rescue Center," "Police Communication System," "Emergency Action Set," "Police Helmet and Vest Set," "My Carry-Along Briefcase," and "Fire Rescue Power Crane," all teach young boys the importance of an occupation outside of the home, generally teaching stereotypical "male" careers such as doctors, lawyers, policemen, and firemen. A popular masculine toy, "My Tool Kit" teaches boys coordination and problem-solving skills needed to survive in the outside world. Manufacturers make these boys' toys under the stereotype that boys excel at task that require higher level of cognition ("Developmental Psychology" 6).

The last major difference noticed in boys' toys was the fact that many of their games and building sets encourage higher education and technical skills needed to be successful in dominate career fields. Unlike the girls toys discussed, boys' toys such as, "The Erector Set," "Challenge Building Set," "Deluxe Solar System Set," "X-Force Put-Together Defense Station," foster them mental stimulation, and teach coordination and problem solving. Through these toys, boys freely, explore and experiment, not having to play at home quietly. Many of these toys, in the opinion of Janese Swanson, "Promote active participation in the outside world, helping to establish a feel for our future world of science and technology" (4).

Due to the stereotypical activities based on gender that society expects children to abide by through the toys they choose, boys and girls become limited only to their own gender, not allowing them to explore different roles. Of course boys and girls show physical differences, but as a young child, they generally have the same mentality when it comes to play. Swanson says, "Before adolescence boys and girls are more alike than different in biology and attitudes" (2). However, society defines "appropriate" gender roles, which eliminate cross-gender play (Swanson 2). Gender stereotyping of children's toys may also play a part in the differences noted in cognitive and social skills of both sexes. Girls loose self-esteem and are not encouraged to achieve, while boys become overachievers and loose self-esteem when they do not feel "adequate."

In conclusion, gender socialization, through toys, teaches and reinforces stereotypical gender roles. Janese Swanson best sums it up saying, "Boys are doctors; Girls are Nurses. Boys are football players; girls are cheerleaders. Boys invent thing; Girls use the things boys invent. Boys fix things; Girls need things fixed. Boys are presidents; Girls are first ladies" (5). In order to prevent children from living by these stereotypes portrayed through toys, parents should encourage gender-neutral and cross-gender play in children at an early age. Americans are far from abolishing sexism, nonetheless teaching children to accept gender-neutral and cross-gender play may contribute a start.